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ICONS

Sean Scully Readies His First Major Exhibition in China

Irish-American artist Sean Scully is readying his first major exhibition in China, at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum



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'Work on paper,' 1990 © SEAN SCULLY

By **MARY M. LANE**

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Irish-American artist Sean Scully, 69, has some health advice for older fathers: if you engage in trampoline jumping with your progeny, watch your back.

Mr. Scully recently spent several months “strung out” on OxyContin after pulling muscles when he was bouncing on a backyard trampoline in New York with his son,

Oisín, now 5.

“I couldn’t write a letter, I couldn’t conduct a telephone call,” he says of the crippling ordeal.

Once free from the opioid, Mr. Scully channeled his reclaimed buoyancy into creating “Jet Black,” a 4.5-foot-by-6.5-foot set of pulsating black bars painted on an aluminum sheet.

The work will be in “Follow the Heart,” his first major exhibition in China opening at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum on Nov. 24 and running there until Jan. 25.

The retrospective at the privately funded museum of property developer Dai Zhikang features over 100 artworks created between 1964 and 2014. Two years in the making, with most works coming from the artist’s own collection, it is a crucial test in gauging Mr. Scully’s appeal among Asian collectors and institutions. He is already widely collected by Western individuals and museums, including London’s Tate Modern and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Though created with just one color and appearing matte in reproductions, “Jet Black” has an incandescent quality up close and is Mr. Scully’s first major piece since the 1970s made with a paint-filled spray gun. It’s one of several examples in the show of new works employing “exuberant” older techniques that he has avoided since the death of his first son, Paul, in a car crash in the early 1980s.

“My paintings got dark and aggressive, and it’s only recently that the lights have started to come back on again, so to speak,” he says, referencing a string of bleak, foreboding works from the mid-1980s that are not in the retrospective.

“Night and Day” (2012), Mr. Scully’s colossal 9-foot-by-27-foot oil painting stretched over eight panels, displays varying shades of gray and black, a reference to daily thoughts of death Mr. Scully tracks back to his Catholic upbringing. The title, borrowed from a Cole Porter melody written for the composer’s 1932 musical “Gay Divorce,” is the piece’s sole cheerful note.

Attaching so many loaded titles and symbols to abstract art may seem tedious at first, but it helps imbue the artworks with the concrete ideas and meanings that are normally associated with figurative work, says Mr. Scully.

“There’s a danger with abstract painting that it becomes mechanical, that you disengage

from the world and ‘fall asleep,’” he says. “I wanted to make abstract painting that could speak about things.”

The Shanghai show will include works from Mr. Scully’s early career before he transitioned to purely abstract art. “Cactus,” its oldest work from 1964, depicts a cheery selection of succulent plants.

Mr. Scully criticizes the current trend for artists in the millennial generation to eschew formal study of drawing and other techniques in favor of digital tools.

“They have photographs and computer drawings and make this obsessional computer generated art and just go on like that,” he says.

The show’s curator, Philip Dodd, 65, says he is conscious of the risk of appearing patronizing when confronting the Chinese public with unfamiliar contemporary Western artists.

“There’s now an appetite to connect China with the rest of the art world. But that puts us in a dangerous position where we look again at the East as “The East” and the West as “The West.”

Mr. Dodd prioritized works that employ broad, sweeping brush strokes and evoke the expressive moments of Chinese calligraphy. The first room in the show will feature only black-and-white works. Half of the retrospective will include photographs and works on paper, a medium traditionally given more prominence in China than in the west.

Messrs. Scully and Dodd both express frustration at the inability of digital images on computer or phone screens to capture the gargantuan scale of the artist’s abstract works, which derive much of their emotional power from their towering presence. Mr. Scully says he is most proud of his ability to create art that is both carnally raw and softly sublime.

So how does he pull that off?

The artist says he is unsure, and Mr. Dodd is no less evasive.

“If I could answer that, it would mean words could do what art is meant for: to excite senses in a way that transcend words,” he says.

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